

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 BANGKO 32860 01 OF 02 030814Z

11

ACTION EA-09

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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TORUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6766

INFO USMISSION GENEVA

AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

AMEMBASSY MANILA

AMEMBASSY RANGOON

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGKOK 32860

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, SNAR, SREF, TH

SUBJECT: COURTESY CALL ON MINISTER SAMAK

1. SUMMARY: AMBASSADOR ACCOMPANIED BY DCM PAID A COURTESY CALL ON INTERIOR MINISTER SAMAK SUNTHORAWET AFTERNOON OF DECEMBER 2. SAMAK MET WITH THE AMBASSADOR FOR ALMOST AN HOUR-LONG INTERVIEW WITHOUT ANY MEMBER OF HIS STAFF IN ATTENDANCE. THROUGHOUT THE SESSION THE 41 YEAR OLD SAMAK EXUDED SELF-CONFIDENCE AND SPOKE ON A VARIETY OF ISSUES IN A TORRENT OF WORDS, EXERCISING HIS WELL-KNOWN SKILL AS A PARLIAMENTARY DEBATOR ACQUIRED IN THE POLITICAL WARS OF THE LAST THREE YEARS IN THAILAND.

2. SAMAK BEGAN THE INTERVIEW BY ANNOUNCING THAT HE HAD SEVERAL POINTS OF HIS OWN TO COVER WITH THE AMBASSADOR AND
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PAGE 02 BANGKO 32860 01 OF 02 030814Z

THEN PROCEEDED TO DISCUSS THE RTG ANTI-NARCOTICS EFFORT (SEPTTEL),

HIS FORTHCOMING UNOFFICIAL TRIP TO THE U.S., POLITICAL EVOLUTION IN THAILAND SINCE OCTOBER 1973, THE ORGANIZATION OF THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT AND ITS RELATION WITH THE MILITARY AND U.S.-THAI RELATIONS. HE THEN RESPONDED TO THE AMBASSADOR'S INTERVENTIONS ON POLITICAL DETAINEES AND A RECENT INCIDENT INVOLVING THE FORCIBLE REPATRIATION OF A GROUP OF CAMBODIANS. END SUMMARY:

3. IN AN EARLIER, SOCIAL EXCHANGE WITH THE AMBASSADOR, SAMAK HAD INDICATED HIS INTENTION TO MAKE A TRIP TO THE U.S. TO MEET WITH THAI STUDENTS IN CHICAGO, LOS ANGELES AND NEW YORK TO EXPLAIN PRECISELY WHAT HAD OCCURRED IN THAILAND ON OCTOBER 6 SO THAT THEY (THE STUDENTS) MIGHT HAVE A BETTER APPRECIATION OF THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS WHICH RESULTED, ON THE EVENING OF THAT DAY, IN THE ASSUMPTION OF POWER BY THE MILITARY. FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS, THE TIMING OF THE TRIP HAD BEEN PUT BACK; SAMAK AFFIRMED THAT HE DID, HOWEVER, EXPECT TO MAKE IT WITHIN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS.

4. REVIEWING THE POLITICAL EVENTS IN THAILAND SINCE OCTOBER 1973, SAMAK SAID THAT HE HAD HAD FREQUENT DEBATES WITH HIS LEFTIST INTERLOCUTORS IN THE POST AND THAT THEY HAD ALWAYS CONTENDED THAT DEMOCRACY WOULD BE PROTECTED IN THAILAND AS LONG AS IT WAS SAFEGUARDED BY A POLITICAL BASE COMPOSED OF STUDENTS/TRADE UNIONISTS/FARMERS. IN THE FACE OF SUCH A COALITION, THEY HAD ARGUED, A REVOLUTION OR COUNTER-REVOLUTION (MILITARY COUP) WAS IMPOSSIBLE. WHEREAS SIX TANKS HAD BEEN FACED UP TO AND VANQUISHED IN THE FALL OF 1973, SIX HUNDRED TANKS WOULD BE NEEDED TO CRUSH THEIR COALITION IN THE FUTURE.

5. ACTUALLY, ACCORDING TO SAMAK, EVENTS HAD UNFOLDED QUITE DIFFERENTLY, JUST PRIOR TO AND ON OCTOBER 6. THE ALLEGED CRIME OF LESE MAJESTE ON THE THAMMASAT CAMPUS ON OCTOBER 4, THE ATTEMPT AT INVESTIGATION BY THE POLICE, THE REACTION OF THE RIGHTIST MOB--ALL OF THESE HAD COMBINED TO PRODUCE AN UNPREDICATABLE SITUATION WHICH PERMITTED "THOSE PEOPLE (THE MILITARY)" TO ASSUME POWER ALMOST BY ACCIDENT. AND THE IRONY WAS, ACCORDING TO SAMAK, THAT THEY NEEDED NOT SIX HUNDRED, NOT SIX, BUT ONLY THREE TANKS TO ACCOMPLISH THE TAKEOVER.

6. IN SAMAK'S VIEW, THE MILITARY OFFICERS WHO HAD DIRECTED
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PAGE 03 BANGKO 32860 01 OF 02 030814Z

THE TAKEOVER DID SO RELUCTANTLY AND WERE ACTUALLY NOT INTERESTED IN POLITICAL POWER. HE NOTED THAT WITHIN THREE DAYS A CIVILIAN, THANIN KRAIWICHIAN, HAD BEEN APPOINTED PRIME MINISTER AND THE ALL-POWERFUL NATIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM COUNCIL (NARC)--THE COUP GROUP--HAD SHRIVELED AND TRANSFORMED ITSELF, IN A MATTER OF DAYS, INTO A PRIME MINISTER'S ADVISORY COUNCIL (PMAC) WITH LEGISLATIVE AND ADVISORY POWERS AND THE INTO A SIMPLE ADVISORY PMAC ON OCTOBER 22, WHEN THE APPOINTIVE NATIONAL

ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM ASSEMBLY (NARA) OF 340 MEMBERS WAS FORMED.

7. SAMAK CONFIDED THAT AS A PROTECTIVE DEVICE, TO KEEP THE NARA FROM BECOMING A CACOPHONIC AND POTENTIALLY DESTRUCTIVE LEGISLATIVE BODY, THE MILITARY AND CIVILIAN COMPONENTS OF THE GOVERNMENT HAD BUILD A CONTROLLING MAJORITY INTO THE ASSEMBLY BY GIVING THE PMAC THE CHOICE OF 120 MEMBERS WITH THE CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT CHOOSING 60. THUS, 180 MEMBERS (OF THE 340 TOTAL) ARE THE HAND-PICKED CHOICES (AND PRESUMABLY ANSWERABLE TO) THE PMAC AND THE PRIME MINISTER AND HIS CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT. EVIDENTLY, THE REMAINDER ARE NOTABLES AND OTHERS WITH NO PARTICULAR ALLEGIANCE TO EITHER THE PMAC OF PRIME MINISTER THANIN'S CABINET. (COMMENT: SAMAK'S POINT WAS THAT ALL OF THIS ARITHMETIC AMOUNTED TO A RATHER REMARKABLE ABDICATION OF GOVERNMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AND POWER ON THE PART OF THE MILITARY GROUP THAT ASSUMED POWER ON OCTOBER 6 AND THE SUBTRACTIONS WOULD APPEAR TO BEAR HIM OUT: FROM TOTAL CONTROL OF THE GOVERNMENT ON OCTOBER 6, THE MILITARY HAD MOVED RAPIDLY TO DILUTE SIGNIFICANTLY ITS 100 PERCENT INVOLVEMENT BY OCTOBER 22.)

8. TURNING NEXT TO THE SUBJECT OF U.S. - THAI RELATIONS, SAMAK WISHED TO ASSURE THE AMBASSADOR THAT DESPITE THE UPHEAVALS OF THE LAST THREE YEARS " YOU STILL HAVE FRIENDS HERE". THERE WAS NO INTEREST ON THE PART OF THE RTG TO ASK THE AMERICANS BACK IN OR TO REQUEST AN OUTPOURING OF MILITARY OR ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE. THE RTG MERELY WANTED A WARM, CORDIAL RELATIONSHIP AND THE HOPE THAT, SHOULD THERE BE A NEED TO PURCHASE "HARDWARE" OF A PARTICULAR TYPE AND IN LIMITED QUANTITIES, THAT AT LEAST THERE MIGHT BE A SYMPATHETIC HEARING IN WASHINGTON. AS FOR THE NEW GOVERNMENT WHICH WOULD TAKE OFFICE IN WASHINGTON AFTER JANUARY 20, SAMAK EVINCE A MEASURED CONCERN THAT PRESIDENT-ELECT CARTER WOULD DEVOTE HIMSELF TO DOMESTIC PROBLEMS AND

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 BANGKO 32860 01 OF 02 030814Z

IGNORE FOREIGN POLICY. HE ALSO EXPRESSED SOME FEAR ("AS SO MANY NON-COMMUNIST ASIANS HAVE") ABOUT THE PRESIDENT-ELECT'S CAMPAIGN REMARKS ON THE SUBJECT OF THE WITHDRAWAL OF TROOPS FROM KOREA.

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 01 BANGKO 32860 02 OF 02 030823Z

21

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BANGKOK 32860

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

9. THE AMBASSADOR THANKED SAMAK FOR HAVING RECEIVED HIM AND FOR HAVING SPOKEN SO CANDIDLY ON A VARIETY OF SUBJECTS. HE SAID THAT THOUGH HIS VISIT WAS COURTESY IN NATURE, HE DID WANT TO MENTION TO THE MINISTER THE QUESTION OF ARRESTS SINCE OCTOBER 6 AND TO MAKE HIM AWARE OF THE GREAT IMPORTANCE THE U.S. GOVERNMENT ATTACHED TO THIS SUBJECT. SAMAK RESPONDED BY REFERRING TO THE CONFUSION OF OCTOBER 6, THE NUMBERS ARRESTED BY THE POLICE AT TAMMASAT ON THE MORNING OF THAT DAY--ALL OF WHICH HAD OCCURRED BEFORE THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT HAD COME INTO BEING. HE ALSO MENTIONED ORDER 22 WHICH GAVE BROAD POWERS TO THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT TO ARREST A WIDE SPECTRUM OF COMMON CRIMINALS AS WELL AS PEOPLE WHO MIGHT FALL INTO THE CATEGORY OF POLITICAL DETAINEES. SAMAK SAID THAT THE GOVERNMENT WAS STILL WRESTLING WITH THE PROBLEM HE POINTED TO THE FACT THAT THE PRIME MINISTER (A FORMER JUDGE) HAD MADE IT A POINT TO VISIT PERSONALLY SEVERAL DETENTION CENTERS SOON AFTER COMING TO OFFICE. AS A RESULT BOTH THE CONDITIONS OF CONFINEMENT
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PAGE 02 BANGKO 32860 02 OF 02 030823Z

AND THE PROCESSING OF PRISONERS HAD IMPROVED. FURTHERMORE, NEWER, MORE MODERN DETENTION CENTERS AND REFORM FACILITIES WOULD BE CONSTRUCTED. IN CONCLUSION, SAMAK PROMISED THAT HE WOULD KEEP IN TOUCH WITH THE AMBASSADOR ON THIS SUBJECT, WOULD

SUPPLY HIM WITH NUMBERS AND CATEGORIES OF DETAINEES, AND ASSURED THAT THE PROCESSING OF PRISONERS WOULD GO FORWARD EXPEDITIOUSLY AND THAT THOSE WHO COULD BE RELEASED WOULD BE RELEASED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

10. OBVIOUSLY BRIEFED IN ADVANCE ON THE SUBJECT, SAMAK THEN BEGAN TALKING ALMOST APONTANEOUSLY ABOUT THE SUBJECT OF THE 26 CAMBODIAN REFUGEES WHO HAD BEEN FORCIBLY REPATRIATED AT ARANYAPRATHET LAST WEEK. HE SAID THAT HE HAD FIRST LEARNED OF IT ON SATUKRDAY MORNING FROM THE LOCAL UNHCR REPRESENTATIVE WHO HAD INFORMED HIM THAT "THE AMBASSADORS OF THOSE COUNTRIES FURNISHING FUNDS FOR THE UNHCR EFFORT IN THAILAND (PARTICULARLY THE UNITED STATES) WERE UPSET BY THIS REPORT." (COMMENT. IF SAMAK IS REPORTING ACCURATELY, UNHCR REPRESENTATIVE BERTA WAS FAR OUT AHEAD OF HIS INSTRUCTIONS BECAUSE AS EARLY AS SATURDAY HE HAD RECEIVED NO AUTHORIZATION TO SPEAK ON BEHALF OF THE U.S. AMBASSADOR IN CONNECTION WITH THIS AFFAIR) AFTER SEEKING INFORMATION BY PHONE AND RADIO OVER THE WEEKEND, SAMAK HAD PERSONALLY GONE TO THE BORDER AREA ON MONDAY TO INVESTIGATE. HE CONFIRMED THAT THE PEOPLE WERE, INDEED FORCIBLY REPATRIATED UNDER TERMS OF AN ORDER PROMULGATED BY THE PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT IN AUGUST. HE ASSURED THE AMBASSADOR THAT THE RTG WOULD NOT ATTEMPT ANY FURTHER REPATRIATIONS AND WOULD SEEK FROM THE CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT PERMISSION TO SEND A RED CROSS TEAM ACROSS THE BORDER TO VERIFY RECEPTION AND WELL BEING OF THE REPATRIATES. IF THE REQUEST IS GRANTED, IT MEANS THAT THE STORIES THAT THE GROUP WAS EXECUTED ON ARRIVAL IN CAMBODIA ARE FALSE; IF THE CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT REFUSES THE REQUEST THEN BLAME SHOULD SHIFT TO PHNOM PENH BECAUSE THE RTG HAD (PRESUMABLY) RECEIVED PRIOR ASSURANCES THAT THE GROUP WOULD NOT BE MALTREATED. IN ANY EVENT, ACCORDING TO SAMAK, THE PRIME MINISTER HAD GIVEN AN ORDER THAT THERE WOULD BE NO FURTHER REPATRIATIONS. (SAMAK QUOTED PRIME MINISTER THANIN AS SAYING: "DON'T LET THIS HAPPEN AGAIN.")

11. COMMENT: SAMAK IS PROBABLY THE MOST AGGRESSIVE AND DYNAMIC MEMBER OF THE CABINET. HE IS HIGHLY INTELLIGENT, AND CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 BANGKO 32860 02 OF 02 030823Z

ACCOMPLISHED POLITICIAN (DESPITE HIS YOUTH), AND A MAN OF CONSIDERABLE AMBITION. IN THE FEW WEEKS THAT HE HAS HELD THIS IMPORTANT POSITION, HE HAS ALREADY DEMONSTRATED A WILLINGNESS TO TAKE IMPORTANT DECISIONS-AS WELL AS FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR HIS ACTIONS. HE IS ONE OF THE MORE EXCITING POLITICAL STARS TO APPEAR IN THE THAI FIRMAMENT IN A LONG TIME.
WHITEHOUSE

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